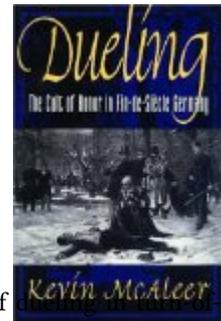


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin McAleer. *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siecle Germany*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. xiii + 268 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03462-1.

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Amidst a spate of recent work drawing attention to the societal significance of dueling in Germany and in Europe in general, Kevin McAleer's *Dueling* is probably the most ambitious in its claims. The book contends that the sort of dueling in which aristocrats still regularly engaged in Wilhelmine Germany (after it had largely died out elsewhere in Europe) was particularly deadly. It was often fought with pistols at close range, with death as its aim. The author argues that the lethal nature of German dueling must be viewed more broadly as characteristic of German society, that it must be seen as final proof of Germany's peculiar nature, and that it must be directly connected to the violent nature of National Socialist society some decades later.

McAleer claims that though dueling originated elsewhere, it took on special characteristics in Germany. Though the practice was banned in Germany as it had been in other countries, duels still occurred regularly in the army, at aristocratic schools (via the *Mensur*), and among noble civilians. Combatants sought "satisfaction" - the opportunity to defend the honor of their estate in a way the prevailing legal system did not allow. McAleer describes the various levels of insult which would have led to a challenge, based on cause, perpetrator, and setting, with each successive degree spurring incrementally more deadly modes of confrontation.

This is an intelligent, engaging, and witty book enlivened moreover by numerous illustrations. However, I did not find the book's theses, ambitious as they are, compellingly argued or convincingly demonstrated (one could say that I did not receive "satisfaction"). The contrast of Wilhelmine Germany with other European countries, Japan, and the United States was not meaningfully enunciated, despite a brief chapter on dueling in

France. The newly-lethal quality of the-century Germany was not illuminated or convincingly explained aside from the use of *de facto* evidence that German aristocrats began to use pistols regularly in duels. McAleer argues that dueling to the death "reflected German society at large" and was of an "essentially 'German' character" (pp. 3,5). Yet though he claims that the duel's continued existence and its tacit acceptance by authorities proves the feudalization of Wilhelmine society, his argument is simultaneously based on the fiercely exclusivist nature of this type of duel. McAleer does not show a connection between the visceral commitment to prove one's aristocratic masculinity through fearlessness toward death (or even through the welcoming of it) and the broader politics and culture of the time. Others have made related connections between aristocratic and popular mores more successfully by examining the surprising strength of the Pan-German League, the Navy League, or the Cartel of Productive Estates. Though such a tie may be more difficult to establish for the duel, there is scant support for the idea that the duel to death had any real meaning for the population at large. At the same time, the author does not explain convincingly why August Bebel and other prominent Social Democrats had such a keen interest in dueling or why they disapproved of the practice. One might have thought that they would have found the deaths of a few more aristocrats a matter of that many fewer class enemies about which to worry.

McAleer does not develop his argument for the generally lethal nature of the German character either, and there is, moreover, scarce reference to the copious literature on violence and militarism in German society. Likewise, the author asserts rather than discusses the relation of dueling to a broad and significant hypermasculinity in the Wilhelmine period. Most problematic, however, is

McAleer's claim for a connection between the practice of dueling to the death and the violence of National Socialism – a connection which seems wholly unsupported. In his conclusion, McAleer states simply that it is “difficult to deny the correlations between the Wilhelmine affair of honor and what happened in the Third Reich,” and that, indeed, it would be both “coy and cowardly” not to recognize the association (p. 197). But it seems to me that the sin of commission – the assertion of such a connection without explanation – is potentially far greater, all the more for a book written partly for a broad audience.

A final note: though scholarly work that eschews pedantry and pedestrian language is always welcome, the sheer number of witticisms and elaborate metaphors in the book was a distracting and obscuring feature. Plainer language might have been far more conducive to the author's ends.

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